



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY  
REGION IX  
75 Hawthorne Street, WTR-3-1  
San Francisco, CA 94105

1 October 2015

Mr. William C. Thornton  
V-645447  
Valley State Prison  
C1-15-2 LOW  
PO Box 92  
Chowchilla, CA 93610

Dear Mr. Thornton:

Thank you for your letter to Maria Rangel at USEPA asking about possible health effects from arsenic in your drinking water at the Valley State Prison in Chowchilla. This letter was passed on to me. I'll try to address your concerns in two parts: what arsenic does to people, and what you can expect from drinking water with arsenic at the levels you have at VSP.

With respect to arsenic, if you consume enough of it, it is definitely a poison and has several adverse physiological effects. At high enough levels (about 100-200 milligrams (mg, 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of a gram)), it stops mitochondrial respiration, your cells can't generate energy, and they (and you) die. This is what is meant by acute toxicity. In addition, arsenic can cause oxidative damage and stimulates the formation of a variety of physiological stress-related proteins. At lower levels, if ingested chronically over a longer time (1-10 mg per day or so for months or years), this still goes on, but not enough to kill you outright. However, your system may be weakened to the point that it isn't as effective at fighting off other kinds of cellular damage, which can build up and lead to other problems. Adverse health effects may occur only after years of exposure to these lower levels. Some of these include circulatory, neurological and liver problems. For example, a variety of skin diseases (hyperkeratoses, blackfoot, hyperpigmentation) are known to occur at levels starting around 0.1-0.2 mg per day. Arsenic also has hormonal effects that can cause diseases such as diabetes. These appear to happen even at much lower levels, perhaps less than 0.1 mg per day.

Arsenic is also a known human carcinogen. It appears to cause broken and missing chromosomes and other chromosomal abnormalities. It can cause lung, bladder, and skin cancers, and may cause liver, kidney and prostate cancers. Elevated cancer levels are seen in groups of people drinking water with arsenic levels of 0.1-0.2 mg per liter, which is about 0.2-0.4 mg per day. It usually takes many years of drinking water at these levels for cancers to occur. At higher levels (0.5-1.0 mg per day), these cancers can form faster.

Fortunately, you weren't getting that much arsenic in the VSP drinking water. The levels of arsenic in the drinking water at VSP were around 0.011-0.012 mg per liter, slightly above our Maximum Contaminant Level of 0.010 mg per liter. If you consume 2 liters of water a day by drinking it or from eating food cooked in this water, you get about 0.020-0.025 mg per day of arsenic. It may be a bit of a comfort that medical studies don't show any disease being caused by arsenic at these levels.

I hope that this addressed your concerns. If not, or if you have more questions, you can reach me at the above address, or at 415 972-3569.

Sincerely,

Bruce A. Macler, PhD  
Water Division Toxicologist  
Drinking Water Program